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FERNALD LIVING HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript

Name: Mayor Roxanne Qualls

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10:01:11

Q:

Um, first of all if you could ah, tell us a little bit of your early involvement in environmental issues in Cincinnati.

A:

My involvement came as a result of my work with a group called Citizen Action, which is a statewide consumer and environmental organization. I ah, started out as a staff person and then became director of the Cincinnati office.

10:01:35

A:

And as a director of this, of the office in Cincinnati, I prioritized working with community-based organizations and neighborhood groups that were trying to cleanup toxic waste sites or fighting companies that were polluting. And that is actually what resulted in me becoming acquainted with Lisa Crawford and the members of FRESH, and their work out at Fernald.

Q:

And if you could tell us a little bit too about um, what were your first impressions of Fernald when you first came here, when you first heard about what the problems were out there.

10:02:07

A:

I learned about Fernald the way most of the people in this community learned about Fernald, quite frankly, and that was through the paper. Because there was a period of time, in many ways as a result of FRESH's initial activities, that ah, the only way that even the general community was aware that Fernald was a uranium enrichment production facility.

10:02:31

A:

And there were potentially environmental problems out there was because of a whole series of articles that was done by *The Cincinnati Enquirer*. So that was my initial introduction, then I um, started working with ah, the people from FRESH and went out there and saw from a distance, the facility. But um, through, through contact with Lisa and the members of FRESH really learned, learned what I knew about it frankly.

10:02:59

A:

Um, because it was their activities that ah, really resulted in the disclosure of a lot of the information regarding the production facility and also the contamination and it was their, just persistence with Congress that resulted in ultimately the money for the cleanup.

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10:03:19

Q:

And ah, when ah, you first heard about Fernald and you were aware of the situation out there did ah, I understand you went and did a speech at Stricker's Grove.

A:

Couple of times, couple times.

Q:

(Laughing) Can you tell us about ah, your visits and the types of ah speeches, I guess you did a speech at Stricker's Grove?

10:03:38

A:

Well I think there was a, is that the one were there were a lot of workers from Fernald?

Q:

Hmm-hmm.

A:

Okay, because actually I did a couple of sp-, sp-, speeches ah, I mean, the iron, but you learn very quickly when you work with community organizations is that, that you can always give a speech. But what really makes the difference is just the sheer tenacity and persistence and, and on some levels ah, oh just kind of political intelligence of the people in the community.

10:04:12

A:

And so I was more than happy to come and, when asked, and give a speech that offered moral support. And I did that a number of times um, outside the fence of Fernald twice, and then once at Stricker's Grove where there was a gathering of the workers and a number of people spoke. Ah, including, I do think ah, Lisa spoke.

10:04:31

A:

And we, we basically were trying to ah, how would you say this, ah, we were trying to make sure that people understood that any of the progress that had been made to date was really the direct result of the community's efforts.

10:05:49

A:

And we know that, and all of the other facilities that were part of the whole nuclear production ah, in this country and that is that, you know, whether you're talking about Washington State or Kentucky or Ohio, the sites there that are in the process of being cleaned up are only being cleaned up because of community groups.

10:05:12

Q:

You mentioned the word tenacity and that perfectly describes Lisa Crawford.

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A:

Oh yeah, oh gosh (laughing).

Q:

Can you give us a little bit of ah, you were sort of an observer of her activities (Comment: ah-um) within the community and working with the Fernald officials and then also working with members of Congress. If you could just tell us a little bit about that story from your point of view.

10:05:33

A:

From my point of view, she, she exemplifies actually ah, the type of person that I think is absolutely necessary for a successful community-based, community-driven environmental cleanup effort. You have to usually have one person that, that even when things are tough, even when things seem too diffused, even when it seems as if it's going to be another lifetime before the real results show.

10:06:02

A:

You have to have that one person that maintains the vision and the hope and can really rally people and Lisa is that type of person. Ah, and people in Fernald are very, out at Fernald are very fortunate that she is that type because ah, the success of these types of efforts really rise or fall, I think on having that type of leadership that she exemplifies.

10:06:29

A:

And then having people who participate in the group because I, I mean, I don't think anybody should be ignored out there, cause it is an entire group effort. Ah, you have to have folks in the group who, who support that leadership and then they themselves ah, get the spark and are able to sustain the effort.

10:06:48

A:

I like to compare a lot of these types of organizing efforts and then ultimately the supervision of the cleanup, to a marriage. Because it is really a long-term commitment. Many people think, oh well, you know, we'll start this, we'll have our meeting and next year – walla it's solved. And you know, perhaps with Fernald it's a little larger scale, so in a couple of years.

10:07:15

A:

And it becomes very clear early on that it's not a year and it's not a couple of years, it's 10 years and 15 years and in some instances 20 and 25 years. And it is unbelievable I think commitment and tenacity, back to that word tenacity, uh, on the part of leadership of those communities that they sustain it for that period of time. They don't go away. They don't deviate. They don't get distracted.

10:07:48

A:

They stay with it.

Q:

And what types of action did she have to take to get uh, local government involved? I mean what exactly-

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10:07:56

A:

Oh, she came and talked. She just, she was, I mean she was on the phone just talking and asking and, and explaining and lobbying and working and doing everything that, that I had always told people they needed to do. And was always thrilled when I saw someone like Lisa doing it because she understood that it's just sheer energy and will and persistence and jaw-boning and persuasion and arguing and dram-, dra-, dramatizing that gets attention.

Q:

And who were some the people she involved in that whole effort, like in local government or national government?

10:08:37

A:

Well, she obviously worked a lot with Senator Glenn at the time. And I know that his office was very helpful um, with her. Locally, when appropriate, um, trying to get even the Cincinnati City Council involved, going on record, uh, calling for the cleanup of Fernald. Trying to get the folks out in her own area of Hamilton County, the elected officials out there involved and the Hamilton County Commissioners.

10:09:07

A:

In, you know, many people until something like this happens, they don't have any personal contact with elected officials. They sometimes are intimidated by that, but Lisa and the FRESH folks just, they knew what they had to do and they picked up the phone and they started calling and asking and demanding and organizing as citizens.

Q:

Great, now um, I think it's kind of interesting because Fernald is really almost thirty miles away from Cincinnati or a little further than thirty miles away from Cincinnati. Um, but why is it important to Cincinnati that Fernald be cleaned up?

10:09:42

A:

It's important to Cincinnati, because one, I mean this is a, this is a Cincinnati community, the greater Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky community. Thirty miles away is, is actually not that very far away. It only takes about twenty, thirty minutes depending on traffic to get there. Uh, they're part of Hamilton County.

10:10:00

A:

We have issues of anybody, of, excuse me. We have issues of, you know, water contamination out there. We have environmental issues out there that affect, not just the site itself, but the surrounding area. And also, I think, that as we look around and see, you know, other communities that might not have this exact same problem, but they have problems.

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10:10:24

A:

It's only through solidarity with them and it's only through supporting them that ultimately you see the types of changes legislative and regulatory changes to help prevent these types of occurrences in the future.

Q:

Great and um, something I find interesting about Fernald is uh, um, that it, it was sort of put into a small farm community.

10:10:52

A:

Yes.

Q:

But it also affected Cincinnati, which was a bigger city further away. Um, what's your feeling on how it changed the surrounding community?

10:11:00

A:

Well, you know, the, from the appearances it doesn't look like it changed very much, quite frankly. You know, you go out there and you still see farms and you still see crops being raised and it looks bucolic, as they say. But what we know is that it had a profound change. Uh, it changed the, the psychic landscape of the area out there.

10:11:25

A:

It changed the medical landscape of the area, even though the CDC recently said that they know they won't do an epidemiological study. Um, and uh, you know, it had a profound change on the environment out there. And even though many of those things are not things you can see, we know factually it altered reality as people had known it, but also as they had thought they were living it.

10:11:55

A:

And uh, many people's lives obviously are dramatically and some tragically forever changed because of it.

Q:

And how do you think the cleanup is going now?

10:12:07

A:

Slowly, (laughs) but um, everybody knew that that would be the case. And um, it's just again, making sure that through vigilance and persistence that the funding stays in place. That the cleanup continues, that if there's problems that those be dealt with, and that, you know, people not lose sight that this has to be done not matter how costly, and that it will be done and we owe it to the people and to that community.

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Q:

And um, what kinds of things are Cincinnati's local government doing sort of also I guess working with the national government too, to make sure that funding stays in place for the cleanup out there?

10:12:57

A:

Well, uh, we do our, like most other cities, big, well, like most other big cities; we do our own share of lobbying. And uh, you know, view lobbying our state representatives as well as our national representatives um, on these types of issues, including Fernald as just part of our overall agenda. And so, uh, the Council has gone on record in the past in support of the cleanup.

10:13:25

A:

And obviously, if the FRESH folks came again and asked us to do something we would be more than happy to do it because it's such an important and critical issue to this community.

Q:

Another issue that's coming up at Fernald too, is a lot of people are going to be out of a job-

10:13:39

A:

Yes.

Q:

When the site is cleaned up. And uh, what are your impressions of what's going to happen in a couple of years when that comes down the road?

10:13:48

A:

For younger workers, there'll be retraining and they, or new sites to be cleaned up. For older workers who either choose not to be retr-, retrained or perhaps who don't want to relocate, then I think they are going to have to look at retirement issues. And it'll be a transition (nodding).

Q:

Now they're tearing down buildings pretty fast out there.

10:14:14

A:

Uh-huh.

Q:

And eventually they are going to have a flattened site. What would you like to see done with that land?

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10:14:21

A:

I think that's something that actually has to be a community conversation (nodding). You know, that's not something for me to, to decide when it is thirty miles away. Er, but also you have an entire community of people as well as a community organization that really can I think claim direct responsibility for the cleanup of that site.

10:14:43

A:

And those folks need to sit down together and talk about the future of that site and what really would benefit the community.

Q:

Great um, have you ever taken a tour of the site before?

10:14:57

A:

I took a tour of the site a long time ago. Um, when they were still handling the ingots and allowing visitors to handle them.

Q:

And what were your impressions of the physical plant when you went through there?

10:15:11

A:

It was pretty antiquated, frankly. There hadn't been a lot of capital investment. In fact it reminded me a little bit of my trip to the Ukraine which I just came back from. You know, take these little factory tours and, in some instances, you see um, investment is occurring now. That they are expanding uh, that they are successful, that they are developing markets.

10:15:38

A:

But in other instances you see factories that were neglected for an extended period of time, with antiquated equipment, with bad production facilities. They are not expanding and Fernald reminds me of actually what I just came back from seeing, in some instances in the Ukraine.

Q:

Hm, and as a person that's uh, um, involved with the environment and concerned about the environment, if you could go back like fifty years, and say something to the uh, Atomic Energy Commission people who were setting the plant up, what would you like to say to them? About Fernald specifically?

10:16:20

A:

How would you want this plant to be run if you lived next door to it?

Q:

Great, is there anything you wanted to add?

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10:16:32

A:

No, that's fine. I'm just trying to make sure that-. Cause this video I think is important for the community out there. So, if, I'm relying on you.

Q:

Great, well uh, in fact let's, let's cover that a little bit. Um, uh we're trying to cover the history of Fernald.

10:16:48

A:

Um-hm.

Q:

And uh, why do you think it's important uh, to preserve, uh, the human history surrounding the site?

10:17:00

A:

Well, one I think it's, it's important to preserve the, the human history around the site because often times, how should I say this? Often times when it comes to this type of cleanup effort that was the result of a massive disregard of health and safety and the environment, um, somehow **people think it just happens. You know, it's a miracle. You know, suddenly people saw the light.**

10:17:38

A:

And corrected their ways. Well that's not ever how it happens. It happens because of people, who say, "enough is enough. And we're not going to put up with being put off, lied to, distracted, you know, patronized." Every single thing that was done, frankly to the folks out there because we have a right to know. And I think that history is important to retain.

10:18:10

A:

Um, not just for this site but for any site where you see this type of effort occurring. Um, because that really is the history. It's not what folks will read about whatever act of Congress or whatever change in regulation that somehow in a sort of self-serving way will be written as if inspired, self-inspired by whoever was the initiator of it.

10:18:34

A:

The truth of the matter is, is that it is community groups that cause this type of fundamental shift and change and that history has to be told and has to be preserved.

Q:

Great, that's all I have unless you have anything else you want to add?

10:18:51

A:

Nope, that's it. Okay, great.

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Q:
Thank you so much.

10:18:56
A:
My pleasure.